

RLG209 H1F 2014
Justifying Religious Beliefs
Tuesday 2:00pm – 4:00pm
Galbraith Building 220

INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Sol Goldberg

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Office: Jackman Humanities Building 218b (in the Centre for Jewish Studies)

Office hour: Thursday 1pm – 2pm (or by appointment)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Beliefs typically characterized as “religious” concern such things as the existence and nature of the Deity, the afterlife, the soul, miracles, and the universe’s meaningfulness or ultimate purpose. Religious beliefs, in other words, typically refer to matters for which empirical evidence or other kinds of scientific verification are lacking. At least so say all those who insist that reasonable beliefs require justification and that justification comes either from empirical observation or solid scientific reasoning. Religious beliefs, it further seems, run counter to modern conceptions about who counts, not only as an acceptably rational, but also as a fully moral human being. How might people who hold – and want to continue to hold – religious beliefs respond to these challenges? Our course will examine these basic epistemological and moral challenges to religious belief as well as the various strategies available to religious believers who are confronted with such demands for justifications. By doing so, we will aim to understand better whether religious beliefs of various sorts could count as rational, whether reasonable people might disagree with each other about the very nature of the universe, and whether those who fall short of common intellectual and social ideals of rationality and reasonableness ought to be tolerated.

EVALUATION

1. **Two Short Essays 60% (30% Each)**

- 1000 words on central topics covered in the lectures and assigned readings
- The essays are meant as opportunities for students to demonstrate that they can develop a philosophical problem and defend a position
- Submission to Blackboard due: Saturday, October 11 (11:59pm); Saturday, November 22 (11:59pm)

2. **Key Questions 10% (1% x 10)**

- Weekly in-class writing assignment
- Students identify at the end of every class the key questions raised during the lecture and class discussion

3. **Final Exam 30%**

- Consisting of a selection of the “key questions”

TRANSPARENCY & ON-GOING STUDENT INPUT

Students, I believe, have the right to inquire about the pedagogical methods and objectives adopted in the course. Although students should not expect everything in the course to be exactly as they would wish it, they may expect me to have justifications for why I have decided to do things one way rather than another. Please ask at any point during the semester if you are not clear about the purpose or value of a topic, text, or assignment. It is the responsibility of a

teacher to accommodate as many learning styles as possible. But this responsibility assumes that students make known their difficulties as soon as they arise.

EMAIL POLICY

I try to answer emails as quickly as possible. But bear in mind that I am not always online and that the quantity of emails which I receive is greater at some points in the semester than at others. This is to say: please don't be surprised if I don't immediately reply to all of your emails. Expect an answer within 48 hours, especially if the issue can be handled quickly over email. If you anticipate that an issue requires a discussion (e.g., questions about your essay), then it is best to make an appointment to meet with me in person.

PLAGIARISM

From the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters: "It shall be an offence for a student knowingly: To represent as one's own any idea or expression of an idea or work of another in any academic examination or term test or in connection with any other form of academic work, i.e. to commit plagiarism. Wherever in the Code an offence is described as depending on 'knowing,' the offence shall likewise be deemed to have been committed if the person ought reasonably to have known."

ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

Students with diverse needs are welcome in this course. Please contact the Accessibility Centre for needs assessment, referrals, and arrangements. The instructor will be glad to provide whatever assistance is necessary.

<http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca/>

CLASSROOM CONDUCT

Please switch off cell-phones before class; do not talk to your classmates; use laptops only for taking notes. Distraction of other students is unacceptable.

COURSE MATERIAL & EXPECTATIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

All of the texts for the course will be available on Blackboard. I am aware that it might not be possible to read closely all the texts for a particular week's class in advance of our discussion. My expectation is that students will do their best to have some familiarity with the assigned texts so that they will be able to follow the lecture. A portion of every class will be reserved for students' questions, especially those related to issues raised in the readings but not covered in class discussion.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

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| 1. September 9: Philosophers' interest in "religion" | 7. October 21: The nature of religious language |
| 2. September 16: The ethics of belief and the rationality of religion | 8. October 28: The burden of proof and religious forms of life |
| 3. September 23: Religious experience as the basis for religious belief | 9. November 4: Moral critiques of religious beliefs |
| 4. September 30: Prudential fideism | 10. November 11: The religious foundations of morality |
| 5. October 7: Anti-rational fideism | 11. November 25: Religious disagreements and pluralism |
| 6. October 14: The "falsification challenge" to the possible truth of religious beliefs | 12. December 2: Tolerance and its limits |